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ABSTRACT

Although a basic premise of higher education is that students must take the primary responsibility for their own learning, problems arise when the focus throughout elementary and secondary schooling is on passive, rote learning with the student totally dependent on the teacher and text, as in Islamic schools. The educational shock experienced in the transition from school to university has been compared to culture shock. It is multi-dimensional, with linguistic, attitudinal, cultural, and cognitive aspects, and has implications for teachers, curriculum, and classroom methodology as well as for students. In the traditional Islamic educational system of the Sultanate of Oman, the transition problem is expected to be especially pronounced for secondary graduates entering the university's English-medium sciences program. Among the strategies planned to help students avoid dislocation of learning are: (1) identification of needed study skills and steps to develop them individually among students; (2) a course to upgrade language skills, compensate for basic knowledge deficiencies, and provide time for adjustment; (3) orientation and sensitization programs for faculty and staff; (4) team teaching; (5) design of courses with activities graded and sequenced according to degree of teacher control; (6) a learning center; and (7) adjustment in the secondary school curriculum and teaching methodology. (MSE)

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Diana E. Adams Smith
TESOL 1984

ED246671

FACILITATING STUDENTS' PROGRESS FROM SCHOOL TO UNIVERSITY: FROM TEACHER DEPENDENCE TO SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

A basic premise of university education all over the world is that students must take the primary responsibility for their own learning. A second common assumption is that this initiative represents only a slight progression beyond the independence expected in the final year of secondary school, since the thrust of the educational process is normally to wean the student in easy stages from total dependence on the teacher in the earliest primary years to a level of maturity where he can not only evaluate information for himself but also make decisions about alternative procedures for his learning. Thus ideally we have track I.

LEARNING TRACKS FROM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TO UNIVERSITY

1. ——————>——————>——————>——————

Elementary Intermediate Secondary University

LIBERAL WESTERN TRADITION

Problems arise in situations where these assumptions about the gradual growth of independence are found to be unwarranted; i.e. in those educational traditions where the focus throughout all the years of schooling is on passive bookbased rote learning, with the student, even at the age of 18 or more, remaining totally dependent on the teacher and the text. The acquisition of a school-leaving certificate measuring the effectiveness with which textbooks and lectures have been memorized is often the single requirement that promotes an Arab student to university. If the university too is constructed in the traditional Islamic pattern with no expectations of a student other than the ability to memorize and reproduce prodigious quantities of information, all will be well - as in Track 2.

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2. ——————>——————>——————>——————

Elementary Intermediate Secondary University

TRADITIONAL ROTE LEARNING (E.G. ISLAMIC SCHOOLS)

However universities of this traditional type are becoming fewer, by comparison with the new universities being established in the developing countries. These, with few exceptions, have taken over the western liberal tradition, which assumes an entering student mature enough to involve himself in the pursuit of knowledge, sufficiently independent to take responsibility for his own learning, and trained to be curious.

It is clear that a student emerging from a traditional Islamic pattern of education and entering a new Western style liberal university is likely to find the transition far from smooth. Not uncommonly he is bewildered by incomprehensible demands from the lecturers; he gives up and drops out in frustration, bitterly blaming his lack of success on the incompetence of the teaching staff. "At school", he claims, "I was excellent." What went wrong at the university he will never fathom. His inability to understand the reason for his failure is matched by that of the university staff, who usually blame the schools or attribute the situation to low admission standards. In the rare cases when the existence of a problem is recognised at all, the treatment is often limited to an orientation lecture by the vice-chancellor to the incoming class, exhorting them to be aware that they are now university students and will be expected to behave as such. But this admonition is meaningless for those with a traditional background faced with a total disruption of learning style - as in Track 3.

3. ——————>——————> <DISLOCATION> ----------

Elementary Intermediate Secondary University

TRADITIONAL ROTE LEARNING LIBERAL WESTERN TRADITION

Kenneth James, in an overview of a seminar on Study Modes and Academic Development of Overseas Students in the U.K., sums up the situation of students

from these traditional backgrounds who go abroad for further study:

"The student's experience of learning in his own country may have predisposed him to a view of learning which emphasizes the acquisition of knowledge stores... In certain societies, these stores may well be viewed, for all practical purposes, as fixed and definite. True, various arrangements of the facts may also have to be learned, but processing or synthesizing the facts will often amount only to learning which given arrangements are right and which are dubious or (better still) wrong. Solutions to problems will tend not so much to be worked out, as learned in sets of interrelated facts; the requirement to extrapolate or to solve novel problems will be considered unwarranted and 'unfair' in such a context. Rote learning will be encouraged, passive understanding emphasized and relevant reproduction tested. Knowledge acquired is expected to be reproduced to pass an examination rather than used to solve a problem in the world outside."[1]

Similarly, John Swales, discussing basic learning processes in the Middle East and Britain, says they "are at two extremes: the former, feeding off the long tradition of memorisation central to Islamic education, emphasises the verbalistic absorption of knowledge, the latter stresses the development of critical faculties however uninformed by facts."[2]

Swales likens the problem of "educational shock" to the more familiar one of cultural shock and alienation, saying, "It is unreasonable to expect students to switch suddenly from minimal to massive classroom participation, to accept...that the exam questions may cover other materials than that which has been taught, or to move smoothly from competitive to cooperative peerwork."[3]

When this disruption occurs simultaneously with the imposition of a foreign language as the medium of study, the language problem is often grasped

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1 Kenneth James, Seminar Overview, in ELT Documents 109, Study Modes and Academic Development of Overseas Students, p.14. London: The British Council,1980.
2 "Education shock" causes student stress. Middle East Education 5 (2),1983, p.63.
3 The Educational environment and its relevance to ESP programme design, p.63 (61-70) Projects: Materials Design.

by the students as the root cause for their inability to cope. The foreign language and its teachers thus become the focus for resentment, and this hostility, if it is transferred to subject courses taught in the foreign language, inhibits learning even further.

The problem is a multi-dimensional one, with linguistic, attitudinal, cultural and cognitive aspects. It also needs to be seen as having implications, not only for students, but for teachers, syllabus and classroom methodology.

The cognitive and attitudinal problems are found worldwide; and indeed many British university teachers would say that they are not confined to foreign students. Be that as it may, the difficulties and disruption inherent everywhere in the transition from school to university are greater for students making the move from teacher- and book-centred learning modes to Western liberal post-secondary educational styles where a student must suddenly assume most of the responsibility for his own learning.

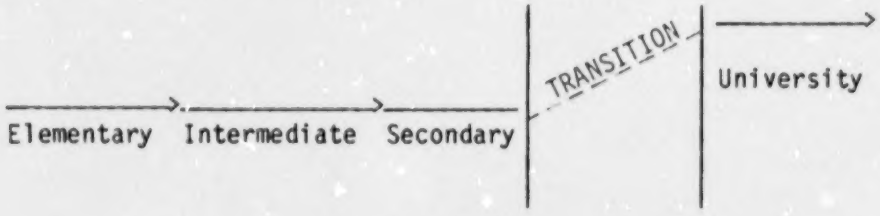
The dislocation is even greater for students who must at the same time switch to a foreign language as the medium of learning (thus facing a linguistic problem); and greatest of all for uprooted students faced with both of these disruptions at the same time that they move to a foreign country for study, thus losing the support of family, friends and advisors who understand their background and culture. In addition they may be overwhelmed by cultural problems (e.g. the weather, or the availability of food prepared according to their religious requirements). In the EFL situation where students remain in their own country this is not such a significant factor, but it still cannot be discounted as a potential source of friction in teacher-student relationships, if the EL teachers are expatriates from Western countries.

One last point: In attempting to solve this whole problem it is not enough to focus our attention exclusively on the students, or to see them as the only variable which can be manipulated. Instead of assuming that all their difficulties are a direct result of their deficiencies, perhaps we should also exa-

mine the other factors in the teaching/learning triangle: the teachers, and the syllabus, materials, classroom methodology and environment.

So instead of the smooth path from school to university charted in Figures 1 and 2 we are faced with the broken path of Figure 3 from which the student may or may not recover. We should like to achieve something like Figure 4 with a period of gradual transition, but how is this to be done?

4.



Awareness of the problem of dislocated learning is the first step towards solving it. Once its existence has been admitted, various approaches may be adopted. Common ones include:

1. pre-sessional or orientation courses.
2. a course in "study skills".
3. a preliminary foundation course intended to compensate for deficiencies in basic knowledge, to upgrade language skills and (incidentally) to provide time for acclimatization before students are thrown in at the deep end.
4. orientation seminars or "sensitization" programmes for teaching staff to make those who are inexperienced in instructing non-native speakers aware of the types of language and study-skill problems these students often face.
5. team-teaching conducted jointly by the language instructor and the subject specialist.
6. the designing of courses around activities which move in a carefully graded sequence from teacher-control to self-directed individual or group work.
7. the use of self-access resource centres to facilitate self-directed learning within an initially more or less controlled framework.
8. input from university specialists into the content and methodology of secondary school syllabuses and examinations.

So far I have been dealing in general terms with a world-wide problem, faced constantly by ESL teachers in the U.S. and Britain who deal with the difficulties facing foreign students, as well as by those of us teaching English abroad in foreign-language environments. I am now going to focus on my own situation, the Arabic-speaking Sultanate of Oman in the south-east corner of the Arabian Peninsula, but I believe that much of this will be generalisable to all ESL/EFL situations at post-secondary level.

Until now Oman has had no university of its own, and Omani students wanting post-secondary education have had to go abroad for it. However a national university is now being built ready to take its first class in September 1986. I have the responsibility for planning the Language Centre, a university service unit which will teach English to all students - which is why I am concerned about the probable dislocation which they are likely to face over the first few months of university.

In Oman, instruction in the schools has been strongly influenced by the traditional rote-learning Islamic style. Changes are being slowly initiated in science, by the adoption of a discovery-based syllabus, and in English, where group problem-solving and study skills are emphasised in new communicative course materials now being written for grades 10 - 12. However, pending the availability of enough adequately trained science teachers, the necessary equipment and materials for lab-based practical courses, and the completion of the new English secondary course, change will be gradual. In the meantime, it must be anticipated that Omani school leavers seeking admission to the university and other post-secondary institutions will be essentially products of the tradition of memorisation central to Islamic education.

Students will enter Sultan Qaboos University in two groups: those from the secondary school arts stream who will be admitted to the Arabic-medium College of Education and Islamic Sciences, and those from the school science stream who will be seeking places in the English-medium Colleges of Science,

Agriculture, Engineering and Medicine, or for science education in the CEIS. Problems of adjustment are expected to be fewer for the first group in the College of Education. University study will make new demands, but the courses will be taught almost exclusively by Arabic native speakers who in many cases are products of the same traditional educational background as their students.

The students in the science stream have a more obvious problem. Since it is recognised that a transition period is necessary before they will be capable of embarking on advanced scientific study, provision has been made for a three-semester Foundation Science course required of all students in the science stream before they begin specialised studies in the four English-medium colleges. This course will include 525 contact hours of English to bridge the gap between the average level of the best Omani school leavers and the standard generally accepted in the U.K. and the U.S. as the minimum acceptable for university study. After the conclusion of the Foundation Course, few concessions will be made to linguistic or conceptual deficiencies. Sultan Qaboos University has been planned as a university of high academic quality, its standards to be checked by external examiners and its professional programmes to seek international accreditation.

In these circumstances, which of the approaches to avoid dislocation of learning and achieve a painless and rapid transition are likely to be most effective? You need to remember that the first class are still 10th graders; they will not be admitted to the university for another 2½ years. So for the moment this is a question of planning and guesswork only. The realities of implementation and evaluation which are sure to throw new light on the whole situation are still in the future.

I would like now to outline briefly what we propose to do, and then throw the floor open for your comments. I would really value advice based on your experience.

1. Pre-sessional and orientation courses for students, at least for the first year or two, have been ruled out for practical reasons. Experience suggests

that last-minute selection of students and arrival of staff at a new institution going through the inevitable teething problems would make pre-sessional courses very difficult. Neither is the weather in Northern Oman in August and early September conducive to intensive active study.

2. Study skills. A necessary first step is the accurate identification of just what skills the student will need and to what level. There is no point in training a class to write lab reports to a specific format just to find out as I once did that the chemistry professor only expects them to fill in the blanks in the lab workbook. Neither is there any future in laboriously teaching students to write ten-page compositions of logical argumentation if their actual requirements will be to write paragraph-length examination answers and technical report summaries. This is how an ELU loses its credibility!

I believe too that study skills should be an integral and integrated part of any course in English for Academic Purposes, not an add-on to a General English programme. These students are learning English as a tool for study, and study skills should be practised and developed by applying them to meet a real need rather than a devised one (e.g. the Hong Kong Polytechnic Allied Health course). For this to be effective, most study skill materials need to be locally produced after consultation between the English language unit and the subject department concerned; thus the focus is moved from the students to the materials and the teaching staff.

3. A preliminary foundation course to upgrade language skills, consolidate and compensate for deficiencies in basic knowledge and provide time for acclimatization.

Depending on the level of students exiting from the schools, the selectivity of the university admissions policy, and the level of the university degree programmes, there may be a broad gap which must be bridged for further successful study to be possible. Given Oman's brief educational history and geographical diversity, problems may well be greater than in countries with longer established educational systems and a greater degree of centralisation.

I will give just two examples of problems that students are likely to face which require a period of adjustment to the demands of higher study. First, a different concept of time. Western university-level courses commonly get off to what Swales calls "a cracking start", with professors immediately starting to probe for students unlikely to manage the course. Arab students accustomed to drifting back to school after the summer vacation in October or November often fail to appreciate this urgency to make a good beginning: similarly they are bewildered by the attitude of lecturers who penalise them when assignments are not handed in by the due date.

A second problem is the unfamiliar function of lectures. Arab students, expecting clearly-marked slow-paced dictation are easily disorientated by a critical commentary, delivered informally and at speed, on previously assigned readings.

You can probably provide many more examples of the need for time to acclimatize before the pressure is really on.

4. Orientation seminars and sensitization programmes for university staff, not limited to Language Centre teaching staff. Here the focus moves sharply from student to teacher. Clearly, whenever we have a gap there are more ways than one of reaching the far side - it may be crossed, or its dimensions may be reduced. So far we have been considering ways of reducing the scope of the problem by raising the level of the students. But we can also narrow the gap by preparing the subject teachers, so that they are brought closer to the students by their choice of textbooks, classroom methodology and teaching techniques, and their sensitivity to the learners' problems and expectations. In other words, they need to exhibit a little "give" rather than a rigid take-it-or-leave-it attitude. It is of course not easy to tell university professors how to do their job better. Though the problem is most acute when these professors are teaching non-native speakers, it is not limited to this context.

The kind of orientation envisaged might well include pedagogy; e.g. a student will understand a lecture better if he knows the subject ahead of time and

does not have to come to it cold; if the lecturer uses visuals so that speech is constantly reinforced by OHP transparencies, an outline on the board, slides or a handout; if he makes clear the transitions from one aspect of the topic to the next, deliberately introduces redundancy, repeats and summarises with plenty of signalling cues; keeps his sentences simple and direct, avoiding both excessive formality and an over-colloquial style with many culture-based illustrations. This kind of orientation then can lead to a reappraisal of teaching materials and methodology.

Equally important, a lecturer needs to have an idea of his students' educational, cultural and religious background. The traditional Islamic view of a teacher is "a model to be emulated". If the lecturer makes it too difficult for the students to respect him, e.g. by openly expressing anti-religious views, by criticising local customs or by illustrating his lectures with off-colour jokes, they may begin both to despise their teacher and, by extension, to suspect his subject of being tainted with evil. Modern Western education emphasises reason and rationality, giving a very bad second place to the power of the spirit; it is man-centred, anthropocentric. Islamic education, in contrast, has always been theocentric; since God is the source of all knowledge, by getting to know more one draws closer to God. Many modern Arabs believe that they cannot achieve Western technological expertise except through the integration of the classical system of Islamic education and the secularised Western system, but they still have many reservations about this union. Anyone teaching Arabs will do well to remember the existence of these opposing points of view, and the wisdom of avoiding a collision; a low-key approach works better than arrogant chauvinism. There are some interesting observations about cultural mismatches in the paper by Holliday and Cooke, and about differences in cultural perceptions in the paper by Bagnole; I recommend them both.

Point 5, team teaching, is self-explanatory. We might just note that, like point 4, this approach is focussed not on the student but on materials and teaching style, as the language and subject experts join forces to smooth the

student's path and ensure that the English he is learning is directly relevant to his needs.

Points 6 and 7 are the two points I originally started from. I still think they are important, but not to the exclusion of the others. They are the designing of courses based on a sequence of activities graded according to the amount of teacher control, and the provision of a self-access learning centre, library mode, where these activities can be carried out. The bibliography of self-directed and autonomous learning is considerable (see Dickinson, British Council...), with most advocates seeing these as a progression beyond individualisation and self-access systems. Carried to its extreme, self-directed learning is capable of completely replacing traditional classroom teaching, but it requires a student of exceptional maturity and motivation and a tutor/counsellor of equal calibre. I see self-directed learning in the Omani university context both as a long term aim and as a useful immediate adjunct of a less radical classroom-based course. Because of its expandable time-scale it allows scope for creative students to explore and for weaker ones to find support and reinforcement. All, however, will be expected, as soon as they are ready, to start to take an ever-increasing responsibility for their own learning - i.e. learning how to learn.

One final variable, point 8, is the secondary school syllabus and teaching methodology. I have said that, in Oman, this has till very recently been strongly influenced by the traditional rote-learning style of Islam. However the Curriculum Development and Educational Research Departments of the Ministry of Education have been most cooperative and open to suggestions from staff members of the university project, especially those of us concerned with science and English language. For example, the science coordinator has visited schools, observed science classes, examined textbooks, advised on laboratory equipment and layout, held discussions with teachers and made a series of recommendations. I have provided input to the English syllabus in general and the new secondary

course now being written and trialled in particular; I have taught classes in a girls' secondary school on a regular basis and prepared teachers' notes on techniques for managing extensive reading; and I have assisted with in-service teacher training. It has been possible to encourage the adoption of problem-solving techniques and group work, and in time we hope to see the adoption of an examination system that emphasises creative thinking and synthesising rather than the word-for-word regurgitation of memorised facts. Changes in syllabus and attitudes will be slow, but this kind of school/ university cooperation is as rare as it is refreshing, and there is no doubt in my mind that it can bring school and university learning modes much closer together: thus opening up another avenue for minimising the problem of disrupted learning patterns.

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SUMMARY

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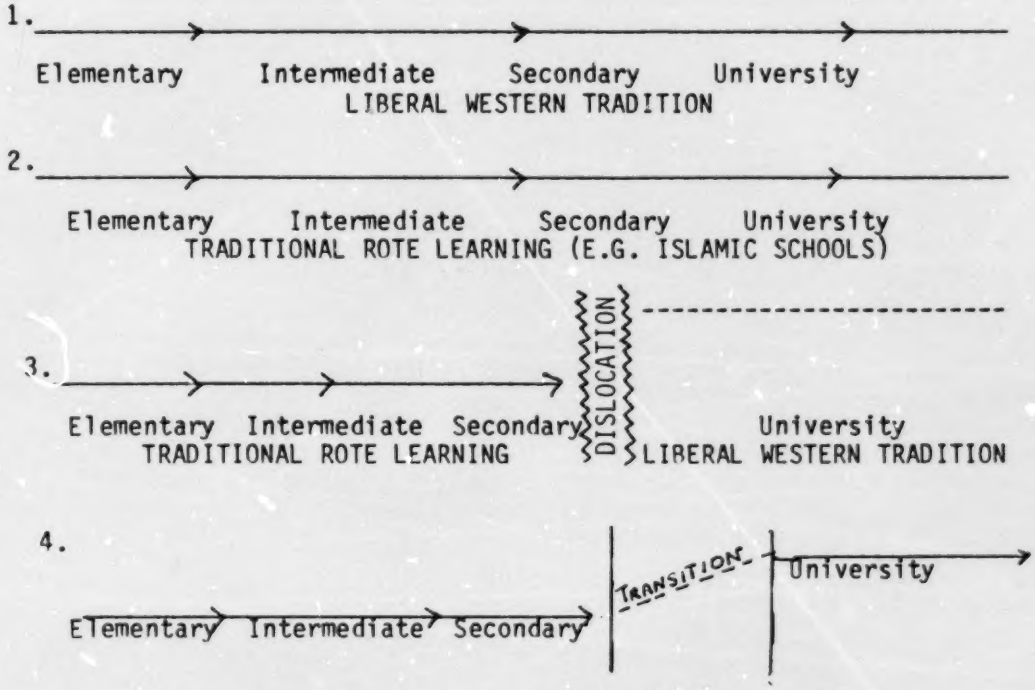
TESOL 1984

STUDY MODES: FACILITATING THE PASSAGE FROM SCHOOL TO UNIVERSITY

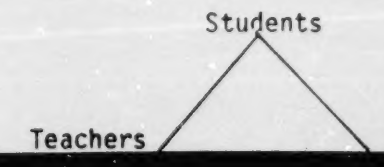
A. LEARNING TRACKS FROM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TO UNIVERSITY



B. APPROACHES TO THE PROBLEM OF DISLOCATED LEARNING

1. Pre-sessional or orientation courses.
2. A course in "study skills".
3. A preliminary" foundation course".
4. Orientation seminars or "sensitization" programmes for teaching staff.
5. Team-teaching conducted jointly by the language instructor and the subject specialist.
6. The designing of courses around activities which move in a carefully graded sequence from teacher-control to self-directed individual or group work.
7. The use of self-access resource centres.
8. Input into the content and methodology of secondary school syllabuses and examinations.

C. LEARNING-TEACHING TRIANGLE



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